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FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT

THE RIGHT TO LEAVE ANY COUNTRY, INCLUDING ONE'S OWN, AND TO RETURN TO ONE'S OWN COUNTRY, AND THE RIGHT TO SEEK ASYLUM FROM PERSECUTION

Written statement submitted by the Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[16 June 1999]

Karen, Shan and Mon refugees in Thailand

1. The Society for Threatened Peoples is deeply concerned about the fate of hundreds of thousands of refugees from Burma (Myanmar) in Thailand. The Karen, Shan, Mon and people of other nationalities fled from forced labour, arbitrary arrest, rape and war to Thailand. As crossing the border without the consent of the authorities in Burma is a punishable offence, returning refugees frequently become victims of arbitrary acts by the authorities. In view of restrictions on the movement of international human rights organizations in the border area imposed by Thai authorities, it is very difficult to investigate encroachments of Burmese security forces. Nevertheless, the names of eight Shan refugees are known to us who were arrested on their return and obliged to do forced labour.

2. After repeated attacks on refugee camps in the area bordering Burma perpetrated in 1998 by armed groups allegedly connected to the Burmese army, the Thai authorities removed the bigger camps to the interior of the country. There are 12,000 people living in these refugee camps. Again and again, Burmese refugees are denied entry into Thailand. On 7 May 1999, 100 Karen were prevented from entering Suan Phung district (Ratchaburi province) in Thailand by soldiers of the Ninth Infantry Division of the Thai army. The Karen had fled after their village in Tenasserim district had been attacked and destroyed by the Burmese army.

3. According to the Thai authorities, besides the refugees in the camps there are 30,000 Burmese citizens living in Thailand illegally. Legalization of their residence in Thailand is impossible for most members of ethnic minorities from Burma. As the Burmese authorities refuse to provide them with identification papers, they cannot cross the border and enter Thailand lawfully. In view of the economic crisis in Thailand, thousands of the Burmese living "illegally" in the country are to be deported to Burma in the next months.

4. We recommend that the Sub-Commission appeal to Thailand to sign the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees. Thailand should also be requested to introduce regulations whereby Burmese citizens could find refuge in Thailand legally. Furthermore, Thailand should be requested not only to allow UNHCR representation in the camps, but also to give the refugees free access to international non-governmental organizations.